



Understanding The News

Fate Of Refugees A Key To Peace In The Sahara

(NAPSA)—An effort to reunite families may offer hope to refugees and help to resolve a 37-year-old conflict in the western Sahara Desert.

Since 1976, a separatist group called the Polisario Front has held tens of thousands of Sahrawis hostage in refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. Sahrawi is the name given to the people who live in the western part of the Sahara Desert. These individuals are forced to remain in these camps because of what many see as the Polisario's unwillingness to negotiate a compromise with Morocco to end what's become known as the Western Sahara conflict.

A Proposed Compromise

In 2007, Morocco proposed a compromise autonomy solution to the conflict in the Western Sahara, which is supported by the U.S. and the U.N. Security Council. It is also seen by the majority of the international community as a "serious and credible" proposal to finally resolve the conflict. However, the Polisario Front consistently rejects it.

While Morocco warmly welcomes Sahrawis who return home, the Polisario denies refugees their right to leave the camps to return to Morocco and it strictly limits access from outside.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which is mandated to protect the rights of refugees and work to return them to their home countries if they so desire, initiated a program in 2004 to try to provide some relief for this sad situation.

With the cooperation of Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria, UNHCR began to arrange family visits that allow a small number of Sahrawis each year to spend five days with long-lost family members. A U.N.-chartered plane flies



Family members from Polisario-run refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria temporarily reunite with loved ones in Morocco on UNHCR Family Visit.

Sahrawis living in Morocco to the Polisario camps and returns to Morocco with family members who have been stuck in the camps.

Reuniting With Loved Ones

Since the Family Visit program began, thousands of refugees have participated in it and an increasing number have refused to return once they reach Morocco. But many more remain on waiting lists for the chance to be reunited with their loved ones.

While the UNHCR program has brought temporary relief to some of these families, many in Morocco and elsewhere believe the situation will not be fully remedied until the Polisario Front allows Sahrawi refugees the freedom they are entitled to under international law—to leave the camps and return to their homes once and for all.

This information is provided by Beckerman on behalf of the government of Morocco. Further information is available at the U.S. Department of Justice.